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The Expulsion of Washington's ambassador to Bolivia

LSE Ideas

By Thomas Field

Early this morning, my wife assured me that the Bolivian government was tossing out my ambassador, not me or any other Americans. I woke up to see the Minister of the Presidency, Juan Ramos Quintana, explaining tensely that the government has nothing against Americans in general, just US Ambassador [Phillip Goldberg](#), who has spent the last few weeks meeting with leaders of separatist groups in Santa Cruz and Tarija, who are seeking the overthrow of the first Bolivian government headed by an indigenous president, [Evo Morales Ayma](#). The expulsion of Goldberg, whose previous experience includes long stretches war-torn Yugoslavia and Kosovo, marks the culmination of his months-long battle with the Bolivian president, one based on a history of mistrust that is deeply reminiscent of the Cold War.

Last June, for example, a 20-year old Miami woman was arrested at La Paz's El Alto International Airport trying to enter the country with 500 rounds of .45 caliber ammunition while the wife of Washington's military attaché waited to greet her at the airport. The story barely made headlines in the US, mostly because Ambassador Goldberg resisted Morales's demand for a full investigation, characterizing the event as an ["innocent error."](#)

Then, three months ago, [thousands of protesters descended upon the US embassy](#) in La Paz, threatening to burn it to the ground. They were demanding that Washington accede to President Morales's extradition request for former President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada and former Defense Minister Carlos Sanchez Berzain. Both leaders are wanted in Bolivia on charges of genocide and human rights violations for their role in [Black October](#), a series of protests in October 2003 in which dozens of indigenous Bolivians were gunned down by troops, allegedly upon government orders. Sanchez de Lozada [currently resides](#) in Chevy Chase, Maryland, while Sanchez Berzain works in Miami for a former US Ambassador to Bolivia, Manual Rochas, a firebrand who in 2002 [warned that Washington would cut off aid](#) if Bolivians elected Morales or his allies.

While these developments have served to strain the US-Bolivian relationship, it was Ambassador Goldberg's perceived role in stoking ethnic conflict, regional separatism, and violent insurgency that finally sparked last night's shock announcement. For the past several months, powerful interests, mainly in the country's east, have brought the country to the precipice of civil war. The capital of the insurgency is Santa Cruz, where political and economic power remains in the hands of a white and [mestizo](#) feudal elite, historically loyal to the United States and the anti-communist dictators that occupied the [Palacio Quemado](#) for much of the Cold War.

Over the past two weeks, violence [against Indians](#), government buildings, and national gas installations has increased significantly, much of it led by the neo-fascist [Unión Juvenil Cruceñista](#), the youth counterpart to the [Pro-Santa Cruz Civic Committee](#), a business-led activist group founded decades ago as an anti-communist counterweight to Bolivia's [1950s revolutionary governments](#). In neighboring Tarija, the newly-formed Unión Juvenil Tarijenista is occupying the airport to prevent the government from flying in reinforcements. Meanwhile, another group of anti-government youths attacked [a major gas pipeline](#), which is now costing La Paz an estimated \$8 million a day in export revenues.

President Morales's apparent hesitancy to meet the insurgency with serious force reflects two historic fears. First of all, his movement suffered greatly at the hands of the country's military in the [Gas War of 2003](#). Secondly, Morales's supporters harbor a historic mistrust in their country's military leaders, who in the early 1960s took power for themselves when they were called upon by the country's revolutionary leaders to put down a rightwing rebellion from the east. Despite having vowed to remain loyal to the 1952 revolution, Bolivia's generals [reversed many of the redistributive policies set by the revolutionary regime](#) and did not relinquish power until the 1980s. Since Morales and his supporters see themselves as the heirs to the revolution, they are reluctant to make the same mistake by turning its reins over to the country's generals.

Not waiting for government action against the rioters, many of Morales's fervent indigenous supporters have vowed to march on Santa Cruz and Tarija, confronting the mostly mestizo youths. Meanwhile, indigenous campesinos have attacked opposition headquarters and the [offices of UNITEL](#), the country's main television station which has fervently taken up the opposition's

banner. Again, anti-US sentiment is stoked by Washington's history of [bankrolling opposition media outlets](#) in Latin America, whether or not a US-UNITEL connection exists.

I was passing by UNITEL's offices last night when I found out that my ambassador had been expelled. Military police in riot gear were guarding the opposition television station, despite the fact that the government's supporters had been behind the attempted arson. The taxi driver explained that a group of campesinos loyal to the government had just tried to burn down UNITEL, expressed lament that their attempt had failed, and proudly stated that his president had just declared the US ambassador to be *persona non grata*.

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